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Pre-Frost Jitters Make
Shortgrassers Hard To Live With

By Monte Noelke

MERTZON — The Shortgrass Country always becomes a nervous sort of place during the last weeks of autumn. Old ranchers, long retired from the saddle, pace the hotel lobbies. All categories of stockmen, from raisers of pit bulldogs to owners of big cow herds, fret over their stocking ratio. Hombres backed by oil incomes that would catch the eyes of Ford Foundation auditors worry as much as herders who couldn't pay for the second card in a nickel ante poker game.

Every niche of ranchdom is burdened by a sense of oncoming doom.

Most of the trouble is imagined. The first frost isn't anywhere near as dreadful an event as the people believe. True, it does signal the end of the growing season, but spring is never too far away in the Shortgrass area.

Weather records from 1860 to 1960 definitely prove that arrival of spring has been tardy in only three out of each five years. The same statistics show that most of our long winters were arrested by the middle of summer. Furthermore, oldtimers have said time and again that economic wrecks are just as likely to happen in the midst of the May Pole festivities as on Ground Hog Day.

Nevertheless, once the autumn blues strike the local citizenry, nothing will cheer them up. Mere mention of the price of cottonseed meal or the activity of the grain market will turn the most congenial gathering into a crying session that would do credit to any backstage hysterics at the Metropolitan Opera.

This is a time when any subject vaguely related to ranching must be carefully avoided. To hold a dry-eyed conversation, you must limit the topics to such unlikely themes as the life history of the cross-threaded Chinese silk worm, or something like the influence of spilled paint on modern art.

People's feelings become so delicate that a man can't open his mouth in public. The other morning, for example, I stopped by a coffee house in the San Angelo stockyards district. Upon finding a seat with a bunch of booted and hatted ranchers, I casually mentioned that I had just seen a mighty classy set of heavy heifer calves in a nearby corral.

From the way they all reacted to this harmless pleasantry, you would have thought I'd committed a breach of conduct that would shock a native of Hollywood, Calif.

One hombre was so shaken he had to leave the table. Another young fellow began to wipe his glasses and act as if we had just filmed a documentary on the Drouth of the 1950s.

Pray tell, what could have been wrong with mentioning heifer calves in the company of men who make their living out of cattle, even though some of these apparently hadn't got their calves sold?

Nothing. It was simply the terrible, mounting tension that gets them all as winter approaches.

It appears that every month becomes more trying in this country. The people seem to thrive in magnifying each new problem. From now until spring, their emotional balance will worsen. My only hope is for an early wet snow following by some warm weather.

It sure takes a lot out of a man to live around a bunch of pessimists.